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RHMFISS/CDR USCENTCOM MACDILL AFB FL
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RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 2344
RUEHNO/USMISSION USNATO 2549
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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [ASEC](#) [AF](#)
SUBJECT: PRT/LASHKAR GAH - HELMAND VIOLENCE: CAUSES
AND PROSPECTS

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1. (SBU) SUMMARY: Over the past year, as the insurgency has gained momentum in Helmand province, security has deteriorated. Causes are varied, complicated, and intertwined. They include: Some blurring of tribal/drug trafficking boundaries; growing Anti-Coalition Militia (ACM) strength; the nexus among drug traffickers, warlords, and ACM; corruption among law enforcement forces; and the inability to make much headway in provincial and district governance. The 2006 eradication campaign, which began on March 8, has attracted minor, but persistent attacks. This trend is likely to continue and possibly increase during the eradication campaign. END SUMMARY.

WHAT'S HAPPENED

2. (SBU) From the PRT's perspective, May 2005 seems to have been a watershed in terms of Helmand's security. In that month, five Afghan sub-contractors working on cash for work program were killed, apparently by ACM. The attack occurred in the Babaji area of Lashkar Gah district. After that attack, Chemonics, the USAID contractor for Alternative Livelihoods (A/L) program, pulled out and did not return to Helmand until September 2005. From that time until now, the security situation has restricted Chemonics' efforts to implement A/L programs. Also in May 2005, a PRT civil affairs

patrol was hit by a suicide bomber, seriously wounding two soldiers.

¶3. (SBU) As in many other areas of Afghanistan, Helmand experienced a spike in violence during the run-up to the National Assembly and Provincial Council elections. Several candidates were killed during the campaign; it was difficult to find out the causes of these killings. They may have been political/tribal in nature. It is also possible that there were ACM connections.

¶4. (SBU) Arguably, the most significant security incident in recent months occurred on February 3. ACM elements launched simultaneous attacks in Sangin, Mousa Qala, and Naw Zad districts. During the clashes, the Mousa Qala district governor was killed. Afghan National Army (ANA) forces that were moved to the area have been attacked numerous times since then. This was the first time that ACM elements had launched a simultaneous attack of this magnitude. Since then, government control of Sangin, one of Helmand's main drug trafficking/transit areas, has been tenuous at best. One district chief resigned after only two weeks, saying that he could not do the job; shortly thereafter (early March), his successor was assassinated.

¶5. (SBU) In Helmand during the period of March 3 to March 17, there were 20 confirmed reports of "troops in contact" incidents, (including one on a PRT civil affairs convoy); four rocket attacks; eight improvised explosive devices; five assassinations; and three incidents of intimidation

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against public officials. The most gruesome was the beheading of four ethnic-Albanian Macedonians near Gereshk, Helmand's second largest city. Several incidents were related to the poppy eradication campaign. Military sources expect a higher rate of security incidents associated with the eradication, as forces move north into areas that are more populated and have higher poppy density.

¶6. (SBU) Over the past several months, we've also seen an increase in violence towards schools and public officials. In Naw Zad district, schools have been closed for months. During a visit to the district in February 2005, the district chief told poloff that he could not predict when they will reopen. In other districts, teachers have been killed or intimidated into abandoning their posts. In early March, teachers in Lashkar Gah received a "night letter" warning them to stop teaching, as this represented cooperation with the government. Also in February, a local crew working for BBC filmed a school burning in Nad Ali district. In late January, three schools were burned in Nawa district. Altogether, at least 60 schools (about 25 percent of the total) are closed. (Note: Since a large percentage of open schools are in Lashkar Gah and Gereshk, Helmand's two largest cities, the situation in the countryside is actually more difficult than the statistics reveal. End note.)

¶7. (SBU) During regular visits to districts, the two most common concerns that we have heard are security and official corruption. That said, there is also widespread optimism due to the upcoming UK deployment. This deployment will bring about 2,000 troops to the province. In addition, an ANA brigade will also be stationed adjacent to the UK troops. Around the province, citizens consider this good news.

WHY?

¶9. (SBU) While the May 2005 Babaji killings were shocking, previous events may have set the stage. In March 2005, Dahd Mohammed Khan, a powerful warlord and suspected drug trafficker from Sangin district, was removed as chief of the National Directorate of Security. He was subsequently elected to the Wolesi Jirga. His lack of an official position locally as well as his election to Parliament, has probably reduced his influence in the Sangin area, resulting in the exacerbation of tribal/drug trafficking issues between the Alozai and the Isakzai tribes. Also during that period, the previous governor, Shir Mohammed, implemented a limited poppy eradication program that reportedly targeted his enemies and competitors. At the same time, USAID launched a major Cash for Work program in Babaji that could have been viewed as a threat by those opposed to the Coalition and government. In short, it appears that some of the non-specific but understood boundaries became blurred, resulting in rising tensions.

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¶10. (SBU) Another problem has been the growing infiltration of ACM across the porous Pakistan border - from the east via Kandahar and from the south (Baram Cha district), where Helmand shares a 162 kilometer border with Pakistan. This border is essentially unguarded and ruled by drug traffickers and/or the Baluch tribe.

¶11. (SBU) The nexus of ACM, narcotics trafficking, and law enforcement corruption also plays a role. The drug traffickers and ACM elements have common interests that include marginalizing the government so that they can carry out their activities with minimal disruption. There have been unconfirmed but persistent reports of narcotics moving via police vehicles and with the help of law enforcement officials, from the senior to the most junior. Turf battles also appear to play a role, along with tribal issues. In late September 2005, the Lashkar Gah district police chief and 17 other police were killed in Baram Cha, possibly due to their attempts to interject themselves into a drug smuggling operation. In Sangin district, the long standing animosity between the Isakzai and the Alozai tribes, along with some apparent blurring of drug trafficking boundaries, is likely one of the reasons for the high rate of violence in that area.

¶12. (SBU) ACM elements also may be exploiting the lack of governance in the districts. PRT district visits have revealed that people are generally disillusioned with the government. They see themselves as, at best, no better off economically after 4.5 years of elections and democratic government. Thus far, the Helmand provincial and district governments have done little for the local population. The general perception is that most government officials and institutions are endemically corrupt. Thus, it is not difficult for the ACM to stir up resentment that works against one of the key goals of the Coalition: extending the reach of the government.

COMMENT

¶13. (SBU) While the security situation in Helmand is precarious, the incoming UK and Afghan troops should have a positive impact. This is the first time that Helmand will see a significant number of troops since the fall of the Taliban (the U.S. has had only a small presence in the province). Improved security is essential if Helmand is to develop a legitimate economy and civil society. Governance, or lack thereof, will remain a significant challenge for the foreseeable future. While the appointment of Governor Daud last December is certainly a good start, other competent and honest public officials are few and far between. Developing a viable civil society in Helmand is a daunting task; doing so is essential if Helmand is to leave violence and opium behind.

NORLAND